

Winter 711

Chapter 711: Era-Crushing Overkill (Part 2)

The chaos burst forth in an instant.

Someone tore off their helmet, letting out a hoarse scream amidst a brief mental tear.

Someone swung their sword at a giant beast lunging from a hallucination, only to realize the next second they almost hit a comrade.

Someone collapsed onto their saddle, panting hurriedly, their hands shaking as if something cold climbed up their neck to their scalp.

More people stumbled and fell off their war horses, rolling a few times in the mud and snow before forcibly steadying themselves, faces pale, pupils sharply contracting.

As an Extraordinary Knight, Ackman forcibly invoked his Fighting Energy to resist, soon roaring fiercely with reddened eyes to regain composure.

His voice was hoarse like a beast's roar: "Steady!! Keep the formation steady!! Everyone look at me!! Look at me!!!"

The roar struck the chaotic battle lines like a hammer, but the response was desperate screams tearing from throats from all directions.

"Don't come near me!! That thing... that thing is behind me!!"

"It's going to bite off my leg! Get away! Get away!!"

"That's not human!! Not human!! Stay away from me!!"

"My horse... my horse is dead! I can't move! Help... help..."

A few knights collided with each other, their armor clanging and sparking, frantically swinging swords at the air, with someone directly falling off the saddle, clawing at the mud and snow as if haunted by an invisible demon.

Of course, this chaos did not last long. It only persisted for a few seconds.

Yet even though the Fighting Energy rekindled within them, and their will began to stabilize, those few moments of chaos had already left an irreparable crack.

Ackman was well aware of this, but he was powerless...

Even with just several seconds of disruption, it was enough to prevent his battle line from restoring its original entirety.

Before these knights could fully recover, a hundred steam tanks had already engaged first gear.

The iron tracks bit deep into the permafrost, emitting a piercing screech as if to shred nerves.

The entire tank formation slowly advanced, that heavy force impacting rapidly with the crushing weight itself, like a mountain sliding forward.

The knights forced to the ground in the front row hadn't even had time to raise their shields when the V-shaped ram mercilessly crashed into them!

"Crack—slash!!"

That sound was like snapping thick wood, accompanied by the muffled clatter of collapsing metal.

The full-cover plate armor under the ramming point was pressed into a distorted curve, the knight's chest cavity forced to concave inward, bones and helmets shattering together, blood spraying from the cracks like a burst wineskin.

The tracks then rolled over them.

"Creak—crash—pop!"

Metal fractured, bones shattered, and the warhorse's legs snapped one by one like wet branches.

Knights and warhorses tangled together, ground into pieces by the tracks, their flesh crushed into a viscous red mud, mixed with fragmented hooves, broken lances, still twitching severed arms.

"Ah—my leg!! My leg is gone!!"

"Help me... help me!! Don't leave me!!"

"Mother... mother..."

These voices stretched on and were torn apart repeatedly amidst the roar of iron and fire, like wet cloth strips endlessly ground in the iron gears.

Someone tried to rise, dragging blood marks with their fingertips in the mud and snow, but just as they lifted their head, the next second their entire face was crushed into a shapeless pulp beneath the tracks.

The helmet sank into the broken snow like a flattened tin can, the facial bones and steel collapsing together, emitting a bizarre "squeak" sound.

More screams were suddenly cut off, turning into a desperate sob caught in the throat before being choked by blood.

"Ugh! Cough... cough... no... I don't want to die..."

The sound abruptly snapped, like a string forcibly twisted off a violin.

The front line had already turned into a mound nearly as high as a horse's belly, a hill of flesh and shattered armor, yet the tank formation did not pause, continuing to advance.

As the tracks rolled over, it pressed the gruesome pile deeper, emitting a wet and ghastly "splat—smash—squeak" sound.

No matter how mountainous the piles ahead were, they still relentlessly advanced like judges summoned by the night, mechanically and coldly, without a hint of emotion or mercy.

A heavily armored magical beast warhorse struggled to stand from the mud and snow, letting out a soul-splitting screech barely escaping its mouth before the tracks crushed over its spine.

"Boom," its massive body collapsed as if hollowed out, the crisp sound of the spine breaking turning the nearby soldiers pale.

Blood sprayed from the armor creases as a scalding dark red mist, splashing the knights several meters away with warmth and a nauseating sweetness.

"No! Don't push me! I beg you—I don't want to die!"

A Black Steel Knight shoved in front of the tracks roared, but his voice was completely swallowed by the next second's metal shattering sound.

Ackman's Black Steel Knights were sliced, flattened, shredded, buried under the advancement of the steam tanks...

Flesh and steel were kneaded into iron-red mud beneath the tracks.

Right at the center of this purgatory, Ackman roared, activating his Fighting Energy, becoming a black lightning bolt bursting out from the chaotic remnants.

Just as his warhorse charged to the tank's flank, it was jolted to its knees, but he leapt up with brute force, raising his sword surged with Fighting Energy, and slashed fiercely at the head of one steam tank.

"Stop for me—!!!"

With a thunderous sound!

The sword blade struck the cold iron shell, sparks exploding like scattered white flame rain.

That blow was powerful enough to hammer a large dent into the tank's shell, banging the metal plate into a curve, producing a steel groan of agony.

But the tank did not stop.

It only slightly shivered, like a giant beast lightly nudged on the shoulder.

The next moment, the tracks accelerated suddenly, responding to the provocation by crushing forward hard.

Ackman's face changed drastically, unable to evade.

The tank's heavy ram slammed into his chest, threw him entirely flying.

"Boom—!!!"

He tumbled tens of meters in the air like a disconnected puppet, crashing through the diaphanous armor and corpses within two layers of knight lines, finally smashing a half-human-deep pit in the snow, blood spraying from armor gaps, staining the surrounding snow red.

But the tank did not glance at him, not stopping, nor slowing.

Like complete indifference to this Extraordinary-level legion leader.

Ackman lay in the snow, gasping violently, the sound of his fractured ribs clearly audible. He raised his head, watching the steel death flood pressing closer, and for the first time his pupils registered genuine fear.

And his Black Steel Knights... had already been ground into unrecognizable blood mud and fragmented metal pieces under the tracks, utterly vanished in the industrial age's ruthless fury.

When the Seventeenth Legion was shattered to pieces by the tank impact, formation completely collapsed.

The Red Tide's harvesting force burst from the gaps between the tanks!

Lambert personally led the Red Tide Guard Knight Order, their red cloaks flipping in the wind and snow, creating a dazzling blood-colored tide.

All members of this unit were above Elite Knights, swift as a fierce wind in action, coordinated to an eerie level.

They moved like high-mobility predators, deftly weaving through the steam tanks' cover.

Any enemy attempting to regroup, once targeted by them, faced only one outcome...

"Burst open."

Magic Explosion Bullets fell like ignited sparks onto dry hay, first blasting the dense enemy lines to pieces.

The Red Tide Knights swiftly followed, drawing swords into the smoke, executing every wounded soldier yet alive with skilled cold-blooded actions.

The Seventeenth Legion's knights were utterly bewildered.

Their proud blocking techniques, formidable shield walls, and heavy Black Steel armor were meaningless in the face of Magic Explosion Bullets' absolute kill radius of ten meters and Red Tide's high-mobility infiltration tactics.

The frost-eating soul-shocking rounds' brief chaos hadn't yet fully dissipated, and the battlefield was soon filled with small-scale explosions.

Each explosion signified the complete collapse of a squad's combat effectiveness.

The tanks' crushing, the Red Tide Knights' harvesting, the blasting of Magic Explosion Bullets concurrently unfolding at the same time, on the same battlefield.

This wasn't a battle; it was the execution of old-era knights by new-era knights.

Chapter 712: Elegy of the Old Era

At the ambush point on the flank, Oser seemed frozen on his saddle.

He had already drawn his sword, ready to lead the Silver Fang Knight Order down from the highlands whenever the Seventeenth Legion broke free from the mire, to cut off their rear.

But when he saw with his own eyes those hundred steam war machines push through the fog side by side, firing simultaneously, erasing nearly a thousand Black Steel Knights from existence.

His sword was held high in the air, but he couldn't swing it down.

"What... what kind of monstrous thing is this..."

Oser's throat tightened, and thirty years of experience became completely invalid.

The appearance of such things is not a tactical advantage, but a rift in the entire era.

He had never seen a weapon that didn't need Fighting Energy, without incantations, and not reliant on a commander's orders to cause such large-scale destruction.

That wasn't a siege engine, it didn't even seem like Magic.

It was more like a group of monsters driving out from a steel Hell.

As he stood dazed, a steady and cold hand slapped onto his shoulder armor.

Felan's voice was like a heavy hammer in a winter night: "Oser, put your jaw away. If you don't charge now, Lambert is going to steal all the credit."

Oser jolted awake, as if kicked out of a dream, his face suddenly flushed.

To cover his previous lapse, he suddenly raised his sword high above his head, his voice hoarse yet thunderous: "Silver Fang Knight Order! For Lord Louis!! Charge!!"

On the highland over a thousand silver capes fluttered violently, the knights like a sharp blade cutting down the snowy ridge.

On the other side, the Cold Iron Knight Order moved steadily like a descending iron curtain, advancing in synchronization.

Nearly two thousand Frost Halberd Knights under the command of Felan and Oser encircled downward from the two flanks, their blades pointing firmly at the remaining scattered soldiers of the Seventeenth Legion, who had dispersed and fled after being crushed by the steam war machines.

Like iron currents converging from different directions, they cornered all the retreating enemy troops, completely sealing off the last escape route for the Ackman Knights.

.....

Ackman was covered in mud, his armor shattered as if bitten by a giant beast, Fighting Energy swirling chaotically around him, unable to form a complete shield anymore.

The air was thick with the smell of blood and burnt flesh, surrounded by mangled corpses, flattened warhorses, and the roaring steel tracks spewing heat.

He stood unsteadily, like an old lion with severed limbs still wanting to slaughter the enemy.

He was already insane, his eyes bloodshot, breathing heavy like the last gasp of a bellows.

"Louis—come out!!"

His roar seethed with throat-ripping despair and fury: "Is this your glory? With bombs? With these monsters? What kind of knights are you!!"

As he screamed, a steam war machine in front of him came to a halt.

The tracks emitted "clack clack" metal retraction sounds, as if a steel giant beast was overlooking this dying human lion.

Beside the war machine, a figure cloaked in a Red Tide cape rode a horse, slowly emerging from the steam.

Lambert seemed to stroll through a tranquil courtyard, forming a glaring contrast with Ackman's filthy and wretched appearance.

Ackman stared at him, his expression shifting from madness and pain suddenly to a... strange joy.

He chuckled lowly, his laughter filled with desolation, "At least... it's a knight who came."

Though he had never met Lambert, the feeling of Fighting Energy was unmistakable; the other was a Transcendent Knight, a fitting end for him.

Ackman seemingly grasped at the last straw, roaring as he charged over, Fighting Energy exploding on his Broken Sword, like igniting the last flame of life.

"Come!! Let me see! Can young people today still fight a dignified battle!!"

Lambert merely raised an eyebrow.

He didn't even draw his sword.

He untied a pouch next to his saddle, and took out three silver-white lightweight Magic Explosion Bullets.

Ackman widened his eyes, finally realizing...

This era's knights, don't need to draw swords anymore.

"You—!" His furious shout turned into a torn roar.

Lambert spoke calmly: "Times have changed, Lord Ackman."

His wrist trembled, and three bullets fell in a "p" shape around Ackman.

Time only allowed Ackman to widen his eyes.

Boom!!! Boom!!! Boom!!!

The triple explosion overlay formed a visible air current vortex, stripping Ackman off the ground entirely.

His Fighting Energy shield shattered like glass, his armor torn into curled edges by the Shock Wave.

He crashed hard into the steam war machine's armor, the metal dented into a deep pit, while his body slid down like a flattened sack.

Blood flowed through armor gaps, staining the snow beneath red.

Lambert dismounted, walking to the front of his fallen body.

Ackman's consciousness struggled at the edge of fainting, his lips trembling, seemingly wanting to say something.

But he could no longer speak, the last scene he saw was Lambert's incredibly cold gaze.

A look belonging to the fire of a new era overlooking the ashes of the old.

Silver light flashed.

Ackman's head rolled off, landing on the snow, still wearing that sense of reluctance, confusion, and fear of the transition between old and new eras.

Lambert reached out, took the still warm head, casually lifted it: "Hang his head in front of the war machine, deliver it to Lord Louis."

The steam thundered anew, and the war machine slowly moved forward.

Ackman's head was carried on a long spear, his once ambitious eyes finally utterly losing its light, leaving only the sigh of an era.

.....

On the other side of the highlands, the observation point of the Fourteenth Legion and the Seventh Legion.

Sol, who was as steady as a mountain, and Bart, known for his madness, both froze on horseback.

Chapter 713: Lament of the Old Era (Part 2)

They watched through binoculars as Ackman's three thousand Black Steel Knights were ground into mush by the tanks.

They saw Ackman himself flung aside like a rag doll and finally blasted into half a corpse by three light explosive bullets.

This wasn't a battle; it was a massacre.

Bartlett's Adam's apple moved up and down twice, his face paler than snow: "Something's wrong, something's wrong, this is..."

In the next second, the man known as the "Mad Dog" suddenly tightened the reins and spun around like he'd been whipped, desperately fleeing!

He shouted while running, "Retreat! Retreat, retreat, retreat!! I, Bartlett, didn't see a thing today! Who is Ackman? I don't know him!! This is a drill!!! A drill!!! Run—!!"

The Personal Guard of the Seventh Legion barely had time to react, hurriedly following, the scene as chaotic as a panicked herd of wild deer.

Sol stood dumbfounded.

He watched Bartlett flee like a mad dog and was momentarily at a loss.

"That bastard... ran without even taking the flag?!"

Next second—Boom!! Boom!! Boom!!

Another round of tank volleys turned the battlefield into a storm of screams and shattered armor.

The heatwave even caused Sol's cloak to flap wildly.

Nearly a hundred Black Steel Knights were reduced to iron-red mush, unable to even piece together a complete body.

Sol felt as if he'd been punched in the chest; he finally understood why Bartlett fled.

His throat tightened, his lips trembling, his curses breaking with rage:

"Ackman, that fool... trapped us to death!! This isn't a battle! It's suicide!!! Who... who the hell can fight against such monsters?! Damn it—!!!"

Finally, he too couldn't hold back, yanking the reins hard, causing his mount to rear up.

"Fourteenth Legion, retreat! Immediate retreat!! If you run slow, not even bones will be left! Run! Back to Gray Stone Fortress!! If anyone asks what we're doing today, everyone answer patrol!! Say it's a patrol!!"

"Run—!!!"

Under his roar, the knights of the Fourteenth Legion were pulled out of a nightmare, retreating frantically, armor clattering, stripped of any imperial heavy cavalry dignity.

Two streams of cavalry, once supposed to be the greatest threat to Frost Halberd City, retreated in despair and fear from both sides of the highland, melting away.

Like a herd scorched by flames, with only one thought remaining: to escape as far as possible.

.....

The roar of the battlefield gradually subsided, leaving only the "hissing" sound of steam escaping from the exhaust pipes of the tanks, swirling in the cold wind.

The sound seemed not like machinery but some colossal beast breathing slowly.

On the North City Wall, a deathly silence prevailed, with only snow falling softly in the wind.

Count Albert stood upright, unmoving, like an ancient pine frozen on the cliff.

But the cane in his hand was gripped tightly.

The expensive, sturdy wood made a faint "crack... crack..." sound in his palm, like a dying struggle.

His gaze slowly swept across the scene below the city.

It was a slaughterhouse; the Empire's proud Seventeenth Legion now displayed like a nightmare on the snow-covered ground.

Black Steel armor smashed beyond recognition by tracks; warhorses with broken spines and twisted limbs.

In the blood-slurry mixed mud and snow, wounded screamed for help.

More knights, who couldn't even manage a scream, had their bodies flattened into dark red pulp.

Albert recalled when he was young, piercing 800 times in the blizzard before dawn, every day.

Day after day, year after year, for ten years without stopping.

It was the knight's honor, his understanding of power.

Yet just now, these knights who had trained for decades, mastering Fighting Energy, didn't even qualify to approach those hundred "iron boxes."

They didn't lose because of technique, courage, or Fighting Energy.

They lost to an era.

A cold wind blew across the city wall, thrashing his cloak wildly.

Albert's Adam's apple moved, finally admitting a truth he never imagined:

"This isn't a denial of our combat methods, but a burial of our existence's meaning."

Behind him, a young nobleman's face paled in terror, his voice trembling beyond coherence: "Count... is this magic? Is it some sort of Forbidden Curse? How... how did they do it?"

Albert slowly turned his head.

His face showed no anger, no emotion, only a deep, irreversible emptiness.

He loosened the cane that had almost cracked in his grip, his voice hoarse yet eerily clear: "It's not magic."

He pointed to the distant tank array, slowly halting, steam puffing from between the pipes.

"From today, the era of knights... is over."

After saying these words, the elderly man, who had never retreated a step before the enemy, visibly aged ten years.

His back seemed to slightly bend down.

The air felt frozen for a few seconds.

Then all eyes naturally focused on the other side of the city walls—Louis Calvin.

He was sitting on a temporarily set-up wooden chair, cloaked, idly blowing away the foam on his tea.

No excitement, no tension, not a hint of the victor's ecstatic joy.

As if enjoying the snow, listening to a piece of leisurely courtyard music.

Albert's pupils gently contracted.

At that moment, in Albert's eyes, Louis was no longer a young lord, a nouveau riche, or a junior winning through clever tricks.

But like a human from ancient times, lighting a torch for the first time...

Fear, awe, submission, these indescribably complex emotions surged forth, making Albert feel unsteady, yet he dared not close his eyes.

Chapter 714: Lament of the Old Era (Part 3)

The reactions of the other nobles were even more unbearable, with more than a dozen minor nobles nearly fainting in fright, their faces more ghastly than corpses.

In the midst of this shudder, Louis gently set down his teacup.

The wind and snow seemed to pause for a moment.

He spoke calmly, as if chatting about the weather, "It must be over."

The moment his voice fell, everyone understood he was not talking about the end of a battle, but the end of an era.

Tap, tap, tap...

In this deathly silence, a series of steady footsteps came from below the stone steps.

Lambert appeared.

He slowly stepped onto the city wall, his red cloak stained with blood, his armor covered with a thin frost. His face, however, was as calm as if he had just returned from morning training, showing no sign of having been through a hellish scene.

In his left hand, he held something, drip by drip, with droplets of blood trickling down his iron glove, forming a string of dotted blood scabs on the ground.

It was a head.

Ackman Greer's head.

That once arrogant face was now twisted in a grimace, eyes wide open, pupils unfocused, as if trying to shout something in the last moments before death, forever frozen in a silent scream.

At that moment, it was as if an invisible giant hand gripped the throat of the entire city wall.

The nobles instinctively made way, and some even fell to their knees in weakness.

Lambert walked up to Louis, knelt on one knee, and raised the head with both hands:

"Report to my Lord, the leader of the rebels, Ackman Greer, has been executed. The remnants of the Seventeenth Legion have been disarmed and are awaiting your judgment."

Louis put down the teacup in his hand, his gaze sweeping over the head, as if appraising a worthless product: "Very good, Lambert. Let the logistics issue each of you some wine to warm up later."

That was it.

Killing a leader of the Imperial Legion was worth only a few barrels of wine in his eyes.

The nobles gasped inwardly, finally realizing that Louis's view of power and warriors was on an entirely different level from theirs.

Louis stood up, walked to the edge, and looked at the head, suddenly sighing,

His tone carried a hint of regret: "Ackman was originally a loyal defender of the Empire, but unfortunately...power-hungry, he went mad. He cruelly murdered Baron Morkan and co-opted the Seventeenth Legion in a bid to rebel and attack the Northern Territory."

The spines of those around tensed.

Everyone understood that it did not matter whether the truly mad one was Ackman or Louis.

What mattered was that Louis had openly pinned the crime of treason squarely on Ackman.

Louis raised his voice, his tone steady: "Fortunately, with the witnesses of my colleagues in the Northern Territory, I successfully assisted the Empire in quelling this rebellion."

He slowly turned his head, looking at Count Albert, smiling: "My Lord Count, you have seen it with your own eyes, this is the truth, isn't it?"

Albert put down his cane, rested his hands on his knees, and slowly bent deeply, placing his hand over his heart.

This was the highest salute of the old nobility.

"The guardian of the Northern Territory...is you. You have saved us and upheld the honor of the Empire."

One sentence, like a declaration of the end of an era.

The city wall fell silent for three seconds, then, like waves blown by the wind, hundreds of nobles bowed in unison.

"The Northern Territory owes you a debt of gratitude."

"We can all testify to today's events."

"It was rebellion suppression...it absolutely was rebellion suppression."

Louis waved his hand lightly: "Hang this head on the highest mast of Frost Halberd City. Let everyone remember that anyone who dares to run wild in the Northern Territory will end up like this."

Lambert lowered his head to receive the command: "As you command, my Lord."

Ackman Greer's head was lifted high, wobbling in the wind and snow, the falling blood droplets shattering on the cold stone bricks.

The new order of the Northern Territory was fully established at this moment.

Chapter 715: Aftermath and New Bad News

Gray Stone Fortress · Ackman's command study.

The night is like iron, the wind howls through the gaps in the stone walls.

The flickering firelight casts the magical beast heads on the wall into a sinister and horrifying display; originally, these decorations were meant to showcase Ackman's martial prowess and deterrence.

But now, these shriveled wolf heads and snow bear teeth seem to be grinning wildly, mocking the two living beings clinging to life inside the room.

The ground is a mess, expensive wine bottles are rolling everywhere, a pungent mix of strong alcohol and burnt smell akin to vomit fills the air.

Bart is curled up by the fireplace, like an old dog stripped of all courage.

He clutches a bottle of Ackman's treasured spirits, his hands trembling like dead branches in the wind, choking with every sip.

"That... that's not..." His teeth chatter, voice cracking.

"Did you see that? How did they go crazy? They're cutting down their own people... that's sorcery... we're, we're doomed..."

He mutter nervously, like a child overly frightened: "We didn't join the battle... we were just out for training, right?"

Louis can't kill us, we're Imperial Legion commanders... we're regular troops... regular troops..."

Sol kicked a wine bottle angrily, although his face looks no better than a dead man's, he tries to maintain the last shred of dignity as the Iron Wall Legion commander.

"Shut up! Be a man!" He roars, his voice trembling slightly out of fear, "That fool Ackman sought death himself, this has nothing to do with us! We were observing from the flank, didn't even make a sound!"

He takes a deep breath, feigning calm: "As long as we claim we were deceived and even coerced by Ackman, Louis wouldn't dare touch two legion commanders. Empire law will protect us."

Bart suddenly lifts his head, lips pale: "Sol... should we surrender? Kneel and beg him? Offer up all our legion's equipment! Doesn't Louis love money?"

Sol sneers: "Surrender? Forgot how Ackman's head fell off? And you think Louis would leave anyone alive?"

He walks over to the large Northern Territory map on the wall, pointing at the position marked Gray Stone Fortress, regaining some confidence.

"Listen, here is Gray Stone Fortress, the strongest natural peril in the Northern Territory." Sol lowers his voice, as if he's shouting to himself, "Those iron boxes of Louis might be formidable, but they are too heavy! They can't climb up that cliffside road!"

Bart immediately nods, scrambling up with the wine bottle: "Yes, yes, yes! They can't take the mountain road! They'll get stuck! They'll collapse! They'll fall off the cliff! Haha... We're safe, we're safe..."

Sol plunges a dagger into the map fiercely: "As long as we close the Dragon Slayer Stone gate, even if he has a hundred tanks, he'll be staring blankly from below the wall! We'll defend right here, waiting for the Imperial Capital to send reinforcements!"

The two exchange glances, seeing hope in each other's eyes, looking less like dead men.

Bart even raises his trembling hand to lift his wine cup: "Cheers... cheers to the indomitable Gray Stone Fortress..."

Sol also raises his wine cup.

Just as the rims are about to touch.

"Wong——!"

The wine liquid on the table shakes violently, splashes out of the cup edge.

Sol's face turns pale: "An earthquake...?"

"Boom!!!!"

It's as if the heavens and earth explode next to the ear, the entire command hall lifted by a giant beast.

The chandelier on the ceiling falls off, crashing into the ground, shattered into fragments, dust cascades down like a waterfall.

The personal guard outside stumbles in, face full of blood, crying out: "Sir! The gate! The gate is gone!!!"

Sol roars in anger: "Nonsense! That's the Dragon Slayer Stone! What siege hammer can break it?!"

The personal guard kneels on the ground, voice trembling to a pitch break: "Not broken... it was... it was blasted open!!!"

.....

The first ray of morning sunlight crosses the ramparts of Frost Halberd City, illuminating three heads slight swaying in the morning breeze.

They are hung in a triangle formation atop the city gate tower.

In the center is Ackman, his face still frozen with the ferocity and anger before he died, seeming ready to curse at any moment.

And the cold light shines upon his eyes still refusing to close, like lighting a sarcastic candle for his gone ambition.

On the left is Bart, his mad dog-like face now twisted out of shape, like a beast skull broken apart, the fear before death had ripped his features apart.

On the right is Sol, his expression almost blank, as if before death, he's still contemplating how Gray Stone Fortress was opened.

The cold wind blows, the three heads gently sway in unison.

Appearing to greet the passing people below.

Also seeming to admit, the old era has ended.

Louis wears a black cape, steps composed, as if walking on his own red carpet.

Auxiliary troops are lined up on both sides cleaning the battlefield, prisoner escort teams pass through the city row by row.

The air is filled with the mixed scent of blood, oil, and morning's chill.

Half a body length behind him, Lambert walks in freshly polished armor, strides crisp and breezy.

A stack of heavy parchment rolls is tightly clamped under his arm, rapidly reporting the latest intelligence as they walk.

"The Seventeenth Legion has been tallied. Pre-battle organization three thousand, confirmed dead and severely injured over a thousand.

The remaining two thousand have all been detained. However... the Soul Devourer has greatly impacted their psyche, most people curl up and scream when hearing loud noises, some even completely numb."

Louis doesn't even turn his head: "Psychological wounds, let labor heal them. Categorize them by obedience, for those who still dare glare, dare think of rebellion, strip away their Fighting Energy, shackle them, send them to the deep iron mine, the mining region is indeed short of fearless laborers."

Chapter 716: Aftermath and New Bad News (Part 2)

The remaining scattered forces will be incorporated into the reserve labor reform camp. Repair roads for three months, those who perform well... will be allowed to wield swords again."

Lambert nodded, turned to another report, inhaled the cold air, as if deliberately organizing his thoughts, unwilling to let excitement disrupt his judgment.

"And Gray Stone Fortress... the situation differs from expected," he said in a very low voice, "After the Magic Explosion Bullet unit arrived, they only test-fired four siege magic cannons according to the most basic procedures."

Lambert glanced at Louis before quickly looking away, realizing that what truly deserved reverence at the moment was the young lord beside him, whose foresight led Hillco to create such a terrifying weapon.

Although he had known the power of the Magic Explosion Bullet through experiments before, its real application in war, this outcome, this shock, still felt somewhat different.

"When the first shot landed, the city wall developed cracks. When the second shot hit the upper edge of Dragonstone Gate, the entire wall of the fortress began to shed dust."

"The third and fourth shots..." Lambert paused for a moment, "...directly shattered Dragonstone."

He did not dramatize those breathtaking details but stated directly: "Before the dust had even settled, people from the 14th and 7th legions came out waving white flags..."

They hastened to present the heads of Sol and Balter, claiming it was a voluntary purge of traitors and a willingness to join the Red Tide."

The remaining deputy corps commanders and their aides were all willing to accept reconfiguration, saying compared to Ackman's methods... Lord Louis's system is the way to survive."

Louis chuckled softly, neither surprised nor pleased.

Lambert continued: "My lord, we have thus received approximately six thousand well-trained regular knights in total. This number..."

Louis finally stopped walking, glancing sideways at the group of prisoners being escorted.

Those once arrogant Imperial Knights, now huddled together like toothless wolves, showing no signs of valor.

"Six thousand," Louis said calmly, "Other nobles dare not swallow them, but I dare. Send them to the Red Tide for re-education."

Lambert immediately responded: "Yes, my lord."

"Inform the instructors that I don't want Imperial Knights. I want soldiers of the Red Tide. In three months, I want them to wear red cloaks and feel unfamiliar with the flags of the Old Empire,"

Louis spoke calmly, confident in this plan.

The Red Tide system he built over the years isn't merely discipline or training but a complete process capable of rebuilding belief, offering a new path.

Within this process, the pride, anger, confusion, and loyalty of an old knight will be redefined.

Making them understand why they fight, who they fight for, and rediscover the dignity of a guardian, enabling them to start anew from the ruins of the old era.

Lambert turned to the final page: "As for our casualties..."

He took a deep breath, steadying his voice, yet it still carried amazement.

"Five chariots were damaged, all repairable. Personnel casualties were thirty-two dead, eighty-five lightly and heavily wounded... mostly sustained during the pursuit."

"To trade five chariots and dozens of lives for military power in the Northern Territory and the integration of three elite legions..." Louis murmured, nodding afterward.

The group moved forward again, now reaching the steps in front of the City Lord's Mansion.

Inside were all the nobles from the Northern Territory waiting to attend the meeting.

Louis casually tidied his collar.

Weir reached out to push open the door, the heavy oak panels creaking deeply, harsh light spilling from between the door gaps, illuminating Louis as if he emerged from the morning light.

At that moment, the whole meeting hall seemed seized by an invisible force, gripping its nerves.

"Swish—"

Hundreds of nobles stood simultaneously.

The chairs scraping across the floor were deafeningly unified, resembling not a noble assembly, but knights declaring their resolve before the battle.

No one dared remain seated to welcome this young lord who had just exterminated three legions.

Their gazes were extremely complex...

Like Count Albert's complete submission and reverence, the relief of small nobles who narrowly survived, and some... whose eyes revealed a mix of hesitation and fear.

Louis walked to the end of the long table, to the seat once belonging to Duke Edmund.

He pulled out the chair, calmly sat down, intertwined his fingers, gently placing them on the table.

Only until the third second after he sat did the nobles slowly sit, their movements gentle as if fearing to disrupt some slumbering magical beast.

The air was so oppressive that one could almost hear each person's heartbeat.

Louis surveyed the room, his lips curling into that signature smile.

"Thank you all for waiting." His tone was understated, as if discussing a trivial matter, "There was some trash outside the city that needed clearing earlier, thus causing a slight delay."

No noble dared to voice opposition, nor even change their expression.

Louis continued: "The good news is, the formations of the 17th, 14th, and 7th legions have been abolished. Ackman and the three other commanders have all been beheaded. Their troops have accepted reorganization into the Red Tide. As of now, all security threats in the Northern Territory have been completely eradicated."

The understated tone was like the final nail sealing the coffin of the old era.

Even though the outcome was already known, when Louis personally said "handled," many nobles couldn't help but feel a chill in their hearts.

Those were three elite legions he summed up with "handled"?!

Just as a tiny thought of "finally a sigh of relief" arose in everyone's minds...

Louis suddenly retracted his smile, eyes as deep as an ice lake.

"But before the meeting begins, I must regretfully inform you all..." He paused. "There is one more piece of bad news."

The air instantly froze.

Seven thousand knights on the edge were bad news, annihilating three legions was trivial, now then... what else?

Louis leaned forward slightly, lowering his voice yet each word thunderous:

"The Empire's Regent King, His Highness Arens, was confirmed dead last midnight."

Silent shock rippled through the meeting hall.

Someone half-believing asked, "My lord... how reliable is this news source?"

Louis's gaze swept across, cold as frost: "In a few days, your own channels will receive the news."

The entire hall was momentarily stunned.

No one cried, nor did anyone show grief befitting national mourning.

To these landowners in the Northern Territory, the Imperial Capital is too distant, whoever occupies the throne scarcely matters to them.

The Regent King's death was more akin to the fall of some deity in mythology, surprising but without direct affecting them.

Someone couldn't resist whispering, "Then... who is the new emperor?"

But the faces of those wise old nobles had already changed.

Louis noticed this, coldly smiling: "I know what you're thinking, the Imperial Capital is too far away, why should it concern us, right?"

He stood, walked to the huge map of the Northern Territory.

His finger emphatically pointing along the only line connecting the Imperial Capital and Northern Territory.

"Currently, there is no universally acknowledged heir. The Regent King's death signals a broken balance. Those Princes will immediately tear each other apart."

He raised his head, voice clear and grave: "Everyone, do you truly believe this is just an issue for the Imperial Capital? Consider this, once civil war breaks out...

Will there still be military funds allocated to the Northern Territory? Will the grain and cloth from the South still flow smoothly? Will the Imperial Commerce Department's orders for your minerals still hold?"

Each sentence was like ice water splashing everyone's faces.

The harsh land of the Northern Territory, long reliant on Southern aid.

If the Empire plunges into civil war, the Northern Territory will become a forgotten island.

The nobles finally panicked:

"If no grain comes in, how will we survive this winter?"

"Who will I sell my ore to?"

"Without Imperial orders, I can't afford my private soldiers!"

"Finished... What if those Princes, to fund their armies, forcefully tax the Northern Territory then what?"

Chapter 717: Major and Minor Meetings

The cold wind blew in from outside the council hall, but what made the nobles tremble more than the chill were the words Louis had just tossed onto the table.

Each sentence felt like ice water dousing their hearts.

"Civil war in the Imperial Capital... supply lines cut... no buyers for ore... forced taxes..."

These words, which had always seemed distant and something that only appeared in the political gossip of the Imperial Capital, suddenly became a noose around their necks.

The Northern Territory, a bitter cold land that had barely survived for hundreds of years thanks to the South's grain supply, what if it were abandoned by the Empire?

It would be no different from an old, abandoned person thrown into a snow pit.

The conference hall instantly turned into chaos, with the noise growing louder and more disordered, as if the collapse of the Empire was already at the gates of Frost Halberd City.

Yet Louis merely watched quietly, lifting his hand and tapping the table twice lightly when the uproar was about to reach the roof.

The crisp knocks instantly silenced the room.

Louis stood up, his hands resting on the long table, his stance steady like a monument: "Lords who have joined the Red Tide system, you need not fear. The dividends will continue, and we will face the coming hardships together."

With those words, the nobles belonging to the Red Tide faction collectively breathed a sigh of relief.

Some even blushed as if they were being rescued from drowning.

After all, the profitability of Red Tide was astonishing; even a third of what they're receiving now was still like manna from heaven for them.

"A smaller share is fine, considering these are extraordinary times and circumstances... we all understand."

"Continuing to receive dividends is a huge blessing."

"Lord Louis's kindness is unforgettable."

Some were even moved to the point of tears.

However, the small lords who hadn't joined the Red Tide system... their faces turned an ashen stew of despair.

Some were already struggling to make ends meet and had hoped to use this Northern Territory reconstruction meeting to seek Louis's favor and join the Red Tide system for a share of the spoils.

If the Empire descended into chaos, they had no idea what to do.

Some depended on Southern trade routes or orders from the Imperial Capital to survive as well.

If the Empire became chaotic, their territories would immediately have their throats constricted, making it difficult to even sustain the most basic survival.

Thus, the meeting's atmosphere was split in two: one side, although still troubled, found solace in the Red Tide, and even carried a slight hint of schadenfreude.

The other side was completely disoriented, panicking as if they were about to freeze to death in the snow, almost crawling toward Louis, their mouths full of pleas and words of self-preservation.

Louis did not immediately respond.

He simply looked around at them quietly, his gaze devoid of anger, yet making their hearts painfully clench.

Then, he smiled lightly: "I am not a philanthropist."

This opening chilled many a noble's spine.

Yet the next line, like the sun's first rise in winter: "But I am willing to give you one last chance."

Everyone held their breath.

"After the meeting, you can register the resources of your territory with Bradley. If they have value... you may join the Red Tide system.

But the terms will not be as favorable as before. After all, I have said before that the sooner you join, the better the conditions."

Then, he shifted his tone, as cold as a frost blade in the winter night: "As for those with no resources... think carefully about what you are worth yourselves.

You don't have much time left. You can choose to die silently with the Empire... or you can follow me, and survive with dignity in this chaotic world."

For a moment, the hall was dead silent.

The nobles lowered their heads one after another.

But in their hearts, they were all thinking the same thought: "How can we align ourselves with this new Lord of the North?"

With all the groundwork laid, the smart ones knew that as long as they flew the Red Tide's banner, even if half of the Empire collapsed, they could at least still fill their bellies and stay alive.

Following the Empire? That would be waiting for death.

In the vast conference hall, the only person without fear or panic was but one.

Louis leaned back in the main seat, like a chess player who had just cleaned up the board, with a faint curve at the corner of his mouth.

This meeting, from the initial chaos to the current silence... was the rhythm he desired.

Seizing the tightly controlled atmosphere, Louis stood up and adjusted his sleeves.

Even this slight movement made the dozens of nobles' hearts tighten, unconsciously straightening their backs.

"There is one more thing," he said lightly, as though dropping a stone into the air of the conference hall, creating ripples.

"As just mentioned, the Empire is plunging into the vortex of civil war. The Northern Territory cannot remain unscathed."

With those words, the slightly relaxed nobles tensed once more.

Louis braced his hands on the table, his tone firmer: "To prevent the southern flames of war from reaching us, and to prevent more Ackmans from arising, I propose the formation of the Northern Joint Defense Corps."

His gaze like a blade swept across each noble: "I will ensure the safety and interests of all your territories."

With those words, the conference hall fell into absolute stillness.

Everyone understood that Louis didn't just want cooperation, but military command over the entire Northern Territory.

This included each family's knight order... all to be under his command.

For the Northern Territory, such a thing had never happened in a millennium.

Knights were a noble's dignity, a symbol of identity, the final card.

Handing them over, they'd feel like tigers without teeth, empty shells.

Chapter 718: The Great and Small Meetings (Part 2)

Many nobles looked pale, yet dared not speak in opposition, only sitting stiffly with dodging eyes.

Louis understood, and smiled lightly: "I understand your concerns. But think carefully, in the current situation, who can still survive with just a few hundred knights?"

He raised his hand and pointed to the winter snow outside the window.

"The civil unrest in the Empire means skyrocketing grain prices. Armor, warhorses, feed, weapons... each item is ridiculously expensive. And adding your knight orders, if facing a structured legion alone, they will be crushed like Ackman."

This remark hit the deepest pain point in the hearts of the nobles.

Louis continued: "But if the knights are handed over to the Joint Defense Regiment, their salaries, equipment, and grain consumption... will all be borne by Red Tide Territory."

The nobles' faces began to change, and they whispered among themselves.

"If no longer supporting those ridiculously expensive knights, my territory could last at least three more years."

"Saving money can expand trade routes, improve the manor, even buy more craftsmen..."

"...Louis is willing to support our soldiers? It's a waste not to hand them over."

These were words of self-consolation in a situation with no other choice.

Seeing the atmosphere soften, Louis smiled gently again: "Of course, I will not act arbitrarily. All actions of the Joint Defense Regiment must be approved by the vote of fifteen representatives you nominate, except in emergencies."

This arrangement greatly comforted the nobles.

Louis's final words caused all hesitation to collapse completely: "Compensation for each knight's battle damage will be paid by Red Tide at a high rate."

The nobles were no longer silent.

Face was saved, profits were preserved, and the risks disappeared instead.

Such benefits, who could refuse?

Of course, what Louis did not explicitly say was that once these transferred knights entered the Joint Defense Regiment, they would be immediately disbanded and restructured, mixed with Red Tide Knights, commanded by officers trained by Red Tide.

They would be sent to the Red Tide Military Academy to relearn tactics, laws, and discipline, receiving training and living in the Red Tide system.

Their treatment would also be greatly improved, from accommodation to equipment far exceeding what their original territories could provide.

Under such a system, the old nobility could no longer regain loyalty from these knights.

A few months later, these individuals would no longer be knights belonging to a certain family, but Red Tide soldiers.

At this time, the vast majority of them had not realized this, only feeling that Louis's proposal was indeed optimal, but due to pride, no one wanted to speak first.

Until Louis's most loyal follower—Yorn, stepped forward.

Unlike the reckless boy from a few years ago, today's Yorn carried a bit of the demeanor of a superior in his gestures.

The young Viscount pounded his chest, his voice resonating loud enough to deafen: "I am willing to hand all my military power to Lord Louis! From today onwards, my knights will heed only his command!"

A few old nobles almost choked on their own spit.

Your men are already eating royal grain within the Red Tide system, what military power are you handing over?!

But precisely because of this, his words carried no risk and were most suitable for breaking the ice.

Sure enough, composite voices gradually echoed in the hall:

"Me too, for the Northern Territory's greater good!"

"Our territory is willing to relinquish power!"

"Commanded by Lord Louis, we are willing to follow!"

Especially those small nobles who had not joined the Red Tide system earlier, shouted louder than anyone, fearing a step slower might lead to elimination.

Thus, the dust settled, and military power, at this moment, was easily pocketed by Louis without shedding a drop of blood.

The subsequent meeting also proceeded smoothly, with all topics quickly finalized under the lead of the Red Tide system.

Infrastructure reconstruction, resource allocation, winter supplies, territory rebuilding... ended perfectly, despite shocking events, the closure was so steady it was almost unbelievable.

The nobles dispersed with various thoughts, some eagerly sought Bradley to register resources, only to squeeze into the Red Tide system, others pondered what gift to present to Louis.

Some bowed their heads silently, with only one thought left in their minds: "This era has changed. Must hold tight to the largest ship, Louis."

.....

After the reconstruction meeting dispersed, Louis stepped into the secret strategy room on the top floor of the Lord's Mansion.

Here was utterly different from the hustle and bustle below, so quiet it seemed the air was frozen.

Inside were just over ten people, but they were the most influential forces in the Northern Territory:

The Sealed Border Lord of vast lands, nobles with real power managing structured knight orders, wealthy families owning mines and workshops for generations...

No one was not a figure capable of determining the Northern Territory's layout.

The flames in the fireplace leaped with deep red light, drawing their shadows long.

On the surface, everyone appeared calm and composed, but in reality, carried a repressed caution.

They all understood, Louis kept them here not to crudely hammer them like the small nobles just now.

People in this room were the real "beams and pillars" of the Northern Territory.

To seamlessly consolidate military power and let the Joint Defense Regiment land rightfully, Louis first needed to appease them, letting them know they were not being stripped of power.

Viscount Yorn and Viscount Willis were among them.

One is Louis's most loyal follower, the other is Louis's half-brother.

A few years ago, they were just small nobles on the edge of the Northern Territory.

But with Louis's rise, relying on opportunity, effort, and Louis's support, they have now joined the ranks of the top twenty elite in the Northern Territory.

Chapter 719: Major and Minor Meetings (3)

Louis did not greet or preface, directly cutting to the chase: "I know what you're all worried about. You think I want to turn you into toothless tigers."

He raised his hand, pointed out the window, where three heads frozen stiff by the cold wind hung quietly under the setting sun.

"But think about it, in the face of absolute power, do your so-called teeth really have any significance?"

Louis's voice was not loud, yet it sent a chill down everyone's spine: "The Knight Order of those three legion commanders is stronger than each and every one of your houses. Now their heads hang at the gates of Frost Halberd City."

No one dared to argue, for Louis's absolute military strength was an unquestionable fact, yet it didn't mean they completely agreed with his words.

Their silence expressed their dissent, the air so still it was almost possible to hear the crackling of firewood in the fireplace.

Just when the oppressive atmosphere was reaching the point of dripping with tension, Viscount Yorn made his appearance once again.

He glanced at all the Nobility present: "Over the years in the Northern Territory, which of the lands seated here has not received Lord Louis's assistance? Food, craftsmen, weapons, military equipment, trade routes... which has not been supported by him?"

Several old Nobility twitched their eyelids, yet still maintained silence.

Yorn remained calm, yet his words hit the mark with precision: "Think about it, all these years, what have you gained by following the Empire? What have you exchanged for?"

He extended his hand, pointing to Louis on the main seat: "But following Lord Louis, each one of you has eaten more meat over the past ten years than before."

The crowd was speechless.

Yorn's voice grew more determined: "Every decision made by Lord Louis is clearer than any of us.

Rebuilding Frost Halberd City, opening up trade routes to the South, developing winter granaries, unifying Northern Territory's security, exterminating the Ackman corps — were any not the right moves?"

As Yorn finished speaking, the gaze of every old Nobility from the Northern Territory was almost simultaneously fixed on Count Albert.

This silent old man was the balance of the entire Northern Territory, Duke Edmund's right hand, a symbol of the old Northern Territory.

As long as he did not nod, this alliance could never truly be established.

Albert slowly put down his wine glass, his cane lightly touching the ground, emitting a muffled sound.

His eyes, weathered by snow and frost, were lifted, sharp enough to pierce the human soul: "Lord Louis, we respect your military might and are grateful for your extermination of Ackman."

He paused, his tone carrying the unique stubbornness of the North: "However, the tradition of the Northern Territory is for each household to care for its own troubles. Binding us together... is it not just for defense?"

If anyone else had said this, it would be a provocation. But from Albert's lips, it was more of a necessary confirmation.

The other Nobility held their breath, awaiting Louis's answer.

Louis smiled.

He walked slowly to the side of the wall, gently tapped the table with the back of his hand.

Bradley immediately understood, and pulled down the heavy velvet curtain.

The moment the curtain fell, the great Nobility collectively gasped.

What greeted their sight was an Empire strategic map covering the entire wall.

Louis picked up a pointer, striking it on the vast area south of Gray Stone Fortress with a "pa" sound.

"The Count asks a good question." Louis turned around, for a moment, his eyes seemed to burn with an uncontainable fire.

"If it were only to defend this small plot of land, I indeed wouldn't need to do this."

He raised his hand, slowly sweeping across the map, his voice deep and powerful: "But the Regent King is dead, the Empire is in chaos. The gate that locked the Northern Territory for hundreds of years, Gray Stone Fortress, has already been blasted open by me."

He suddenly leaned forward, close to the table, his tone becoming as fiery as flames: "Gentlemen, do you really want to shrink for a lifetime in this icy wasteland?"

Don't you want to go to the warm winds of the South, seize a few vineyards? Don't you want to occupy several non-freezing ports? Do you not wish for your children to grow up in the sunlight instead of freezing to death in the blizzard?"

These words were indeed rebellious, impossible to say to all the Nobility of the Northern Territory, but Louis was confident that no one in this secret chamber would leak the conversation.

And these words struck like lightning, fiercely clashing in the heart of everyone present.

Count Albert's murky old eyes suddenly shone astonishingly bright, murmuring: "When Duke Edmund was alive... we also thought of heading south."

But Duke Edmund was too... noble. He adhered strictly to the oath of the guardian, unwilling to be drawn into intra-empire strife. Furthermore, at that time, Gray Stone Fortress still stood in the way, a natural barrier."

Albert slowly stood up, as if his entire being was reignited like a torch.

He suddenly raised his wine glass high: "The Albert Clan's trade line to the South has been strangled for twenty years! I am fed up with groveling to the Southern folks!"

The glass was raised higher, his voice shook the entire strategic room: "If your target is the South, then the knights of the Albert Clan are willing to lead the charge!!"

At this moment, the air in the room trembled.

With the leader Albert siding with Louis, the remaining Nobility's dissatisfaction over power being seized instantly vanished.

Replacing it was a boundless longing for the fertile lands of the South, the warm wind, and for wealth and glory.

Excited debates erupted within the room:

"How much does Southern wine sell for each year?"

"Non-freezing ports... that is a treasured dreamland!"

"If we can go south, even dying on the way would be worth it!"

Louis gestured, the commotion gradually quieted down.

His voice was clear and calm, yet brimming with a confidence that calmed the soul: "War is not a game, heading south requires the right timing. If you trust me, then I will lead the Northern Territory to strike at the most opportune moment."

This sentence served like the anchor of the sea god, instantly settling all anxious hearts.

For they all knew, since Louis's rise, be it against the Nest, the Barbarian Race, or the Corps, there hasn't been a campaign or decision that failed.

He excelled at waiting for the perfect timing, as well as striking with full force once the moment arrived.

With the details settled, everyone raised crystal glasses:

"For the Northern Territory!"

"For a new future!"

"For the Southern vineyards!"

The sound of clinking glasses echoed within the secret chamber, clear and melodious, as if prematurely celebrating the victory soon to come.

At this moment, the war machine of the Northern Territory, under the command of Louis, began to operate, while the South was undergoing a tremendous turmoil.

Chapter 720: The Death of the Regent King?

The study was as warm as early spring, with the fire in the fireplace blazing brightly, making the whole room comfortably warm.

Yet outside the window, rain poured down heavily, accompanied by incessant thunder, as if the entire Imperial Capital was submerged in darkness.

Fourth Prince Rhine sat by the window, holding a pot of delicate and exotic flowers in one hand, and a silver pair of scissors in the other.

The sound of raindrops hitting the window intermingled with the light snipping of the scissors, but none of it disturbed him in the slightest.

His movements as he trimmed the leaves were elegant and slow, each cut full of patience but also indifference.

Finance Minister Belial stood nearby, gripping a thick financial report which was slightly bent in his grasp.

He cleared his throat, his tone respectful yet tinged with urgency: "Your Highness, the commander of the Twenty-second Legion has just sent a secret message through a trusted aide... He says he is willing to submit to you."

Rhine responded with a "hmm," as if hearing something of no consequence.

He lifted a branch, trimmed off a yellowing leaf, and smiled faintly: "The Iron Guard most valued by the Second Prince... is no different."

He flicked the withered leaf with his fingertips, watching it fall onto the silver tray.

"Loyalty?" he murmured, "Heh, as fragile as this leaf."

Belial bent his body in agreement, perhaps to flatter: "At first, the legion commander even wanted to draw his sword against our envoy. But his family's warehouses don't even have enough hay for the horses come spring.

We erased the smuggling charges against his nephew and paid him three months' wages... He knelt faster than anyone. These military officers have always been like this.

Rhine chuckled, as if hearing a matter-of-fact statement.

He continued pruning the plants: "Second brother always thought that as long as he shared life and death with the knights, they would be as loyal as the legends say. But he never understood..."

The scissors made another light snip.

"When glory cannot be exchanged for tangible goods, the knight is less loyal than a servant tending to the hay in the stables."

After speaking, he finally put down the scissors and picked up the gold-dipped quill on the table.

He walked over to the Empire's grand map on the wall, gently covering the flags of the Twenty-first and Eighteenth Legions with the color representing his own authority.

"Your Highness," Belial lowered his voice, "there are still five legions wavering. If they continue to wait... all the Empire's military officers are watching your next move."

Rhine paused his writing and looked back at him.

His gaze resembled that of an old fox assessing a chessboard rather than a young prince.

"Attitude?" he softly repeated, "My attitude has always been simple; it depends on their own."

He returned to the desk, picking up the clipped withered leaf, rubbing it gently: "Tell them... their time is running out."

The withered leaf turned to fine powder in his palm, gray specks falling through his fingers like old ashes being scattered.

Thunder burst outside the window, echoing the unspoken words he left unsaid.

Rhine watched the gray powder in his hand, his expression unchanging.

That composure did not stem from the recklessness of a young prince, but from the confidence he truly owned at the moment. Those military officers who originally had nothing to do with him had long been bought over one by one.

A number of core legions under the Second Prince's command had also shifted towards him under the pressure of famine and supply cuts.

Those who once claimed loyalty, their voices louder than the wind, immediately changed allegiance when their pay was on time and someone backed their family assets.

Now, the military power he commanded far exceeded any faction within the Empire.

He lacked neither knights nor people willing to risk their lives for him.

At this moment, there was a gentle knock at the door. A guard entered, pausing slightly upon seeing Belial, seemingly about to say something but swallowing it back.

Rhine looked up, seeing through his hesitation: "News from the palace?"

The guard nodded.

"Speak," Rhine's tone was as gentle as asking about the weather, "Belial is one of us."

Belial was momentarily stunned by the words, as if something struck his chest, a few genuine emotions of gratitude appearing on his face.

Only then did the guard straighten up, reporting: "Your Highness... news from the palace says the Regent King might not last two more days."

As he finished speaking, the rainstorm crashed against the window with a heavy, crisp sound.

Rhine lowered his head, chuckling softly, somewhere between unable to hold back and mocking the arrangement of fate: "Ah... it's finally come to this."

Belial kept his head down, unsure whether he should be smiling, carefully maintaining his silence.

Rhine already turned around, looking at the guard: "Go tell the steward I want to host a ball tonight. Invite representatives of all Eight Great Clans, and bring the high officials of the Empire too."

He paused, his tone light as if discussing a trivial matter: "Note down who comes and who doesn't."

The guard accepted the orders, about to withdraw when Rhine added: "Oh, and... remember to invite Second Brother and Fifth Brother to join as well."

His tone was polite and gentle.

.....

The rain battered the eaves of the palace, the force seemingly capable of tearing the entire Imperial Capital apart.

Thunder rolled deep in the sky, illuminating the gilt stone pillars outside the sleeping chambers with a flickering glow.

Inside Regent King Arlens' chambers, candlelight flickered in the damp, cold air, the flame squeezed into a thin line by the wind, reflecting a room dead silent.

The air was filled with a sickly sweet smell of decay, the scent of impending death.

Arlens lay on his bed, his emaciated body now little more than skin and bones.

And in the agony of pain, he briefly woke, his gaze moving with difficulty, pointing to the door of his chambers.

In the shadows, an old man quietly stepped out.